

Ayya Santacitta | Ayya Anandabodhi
Week 1, *Never Turn Away: Opening the Mind of Awakening*
November 3, 2014
“Meeting the Five Hindrances”
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Ayya Santacitta: Hello and welcome to our teaching on Never Turn Away. My name is Ayya Santacitta. I’m originally from Austria and I’ve been a nun for over twenty years.

Ayya Anandabodhi: My name is Ayya Anandabodhi. I’m originally from Wales. I’ve also been a nun for over twenty years. Right now we’re sitting in the Aloka Vihara shrine room in our little monastery up here in the Sierra foothills. Today we’d like to speak to you about the five hindrances. I’ll be introducing the five hindrances to enlightenment, or the things that trip us up.

Ayya Santacitta: I will then take over and speak about the seven factors of enlightenment. Afterwards, I’ll continue to go into the details of the first half of the seven factors, and then Anandabodhi will speak about the second half of the seven factors.

Ayya Anandabodhi: We hope that something that we offer will be of benefit to you in your practice. I wanted to speak to you today about the five hindrances that the Buddha, with his compassion, pointed out. This describes the nature of our minds and the way that our minds and our thoughts pull us off track.

Hindrance is an old-fashioned word referencing that which slows us down, pulls us off track, stops us from going where we really want to go or stops us from seeing our true nature. If you’re studying, the five hindrances will come up quite early on in the practices. Often people say, “Oh, yeah, five hindrances, got that. Now on to the next thing.” I would like to encourage you to keep these in mind because they’re very important. When we’re not aware of them, then we are very much under their sway. I’d just like to list these five first.

The first one is sensual desire, which is something that we all know. This is where the mind is pulled out, drawn out, or attracted to something outside of ourselves. There’s a wish to draw that in or become one with whatever it might be. That cream cake that is alluring us from the bakery, for example. Sensual desire is that feeling that the mind just wants to go out and take in that wonderful thing,

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become part of it and have that gratification. It always seems to offer the promise of “this will give you satisfaction.” That’s the nature of sense of desire. It promises satisfaction. It does deliver for a little while, and then that passes and then we look for the next thing. If our particular passion is cream cakes, then we might look for the next cream cake. We take another, one that’s even better than the first one, and we eat that. After a while, we start to feel sick. We start to get ill and our teeth start to rot because we can’t only take sensual pleasures. We can’t live off sensual desire. There’s always the other side. I’m sure everybody has noticed this. Sensual desire, the Buddha pointed out, is a hindrance to enlightenment. Following sensual desire is a hindrance to enlightenment.

Then there’s ill will, which I’m sure everybody knows, too. Ill will can manifest in many ways. It can be hatred—a deep, intense hatred. It can be anger. It can be resentment. Fear is an aspect of ill will. It’s like not wanting or pushing away. Ill will is a natural quality. Desire, ill will, anger and fear are all natural qualities. Actually, they’re biological qualities that the body is hardwired with in order to survive. But much of the time we’re operating from those qualities in a way that has nothing to do with our survival. It often has to do with our desires and our neuroses. I’m speaking from the perspective of when our lives are getting lost, or when our lives are getting pulled off track through these obscurations of the mind.

We might be in a situation where we see somebody and, as soon as we see him or her, have a feeling of aversion. That person has become a sign of aversion in our minds that is there regardless of what they’re doing. In that moment, even if that person is very mind-open, we may think, “Ugh, there’s that person. Ugh.” There’s the aversion. We need to turn our attention back to our own minds and recognize the triggers and the qualities of these hindrances. The first two hindrances—sensual desire and ill will—are like a pair. One is trying to bring towards us the pleasant and the other is pushing away the unpleasant.

Then there is restlessness. Restlessness, agitation, anxiety—they all kind of go together. This is where the mind is on the surface, where things are all on the surface. We’re getting agitated, restless; we can’t settle and we can’t really be in the present moment. We can’t really be with what is going on because there’s too much restlessness and agitation. It can be exciting. In America, whatever is exciting is the really cool thing. You know, “Oh, I’m so excited about this. I’m so

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excited about that.” Excitement can be nice for a little while, but really it is that agitated stage where we’re anticipating something. There’s no peace there. If we’re always following or always acting from that restlessness, then we never find any peace. We never have a chance to rest.

The hindrance that we pair with restlessness is generally translated as sloth and torpor. This is the sleepy, dull mind. The body feels heavy and listless. This is when the energy is too low and sinking. It can feel quite harmless. We might be sitting in meditation feeling a bit drowsy and then, for a moment, nod off a little. We can do that and think, “Oh, it’s harmless enough.” What’s actually happening is that the mind is just not with what’s going on. We can be semi-present and kidding ourselves that we are really present when we’re not. When that happens, in that place of dullness, we’re missing the magic of this moment. Also, if we don’t take care of our bodies, then they get heavy. They get dull. The qi energy, the life energy, doesn’t flow. Life becomes this heavy experience of plodding along and just getting through things. On the extreme end there can be depression or even just a disinterest in life. So these are two pairs: restlessness and agitation at one extreme and dullness and heaviness at the other extreme. The Buddha is always pointing us to the middle way—the place between the two extremes—as the place of freedom.

The fifth hindrance is the hindrance of doubt. Doubt is a tricky one. Doubt takes us round and round in circles. We seem to think that if we just stay with doubt long enough, if we just keep looking at it and keep going round with it, eventually we’ll come to the right answer. That’s what it promises. Actually, all it does is go round and round like a dog chasing its tail. Some people have very strong afflictions of doubt. They live in a perpetual state of doubt, but can still live because they make little decisions. Even if we can’t make the big life decisions, we make little decisions and say, “Okay, I’m going to do this now.” In our lives, we can’t know what the outcome is going to be. Sometimes we think that there’s one kind of outcome and if we make the right decision we will come to that right place. But life is happening now. What we do now—how we think, speak, and act now in this moment—influences how the next moment unfolds, both for ourselves and others. It’s not that there’s some fixed future—or one path or another path—and we’ve got to take the right one. It is about understanding that life unfolds depending on how we meet it in the moment. We can go round and round in doubt forever. Or we can just say, “Okay, this is doubt. Doubt is a hindrance to

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enlightenment. It's here, it's present and I don't know what to do. I'll have a look at the possibilities and make a choice. Or maybe I can make an educated guess or choose something that feels like there's a bit of energy in it.” Do that and see what happens. If it was the wrong thing, then you reflect, “Okay, that was the wrong thing.” You can then revisit, make a different choice or go in a different direction.

The Buddha pointed to these five hindrances of the mind, which we all experience. At any time of day, typically one or more of those things will be going on. Much of the time we're unaware of them. Sometimes, we've also got this idea that we should be good Buddhists. When we feel real aversion towards somebody and find ourselves thinking, “he or she really, really annoys me. I really feel annoyed at that person,” we might then think, “I shouldn't feel like that because I'm a good Buddhist and good Buddhists don't feel like that towards people.” That makes things really complicated because then we're creating a self. We're creating a me that says, “I'm a good Buddhist; good Buddhists are like this.” Then we have to fit into a mold of being what we imagine a good Buddhist is rather than meeting the actual experience in the moment. When we meet aversion, what does it feel like in the body? Where is it in the body? There's all the stories, all the thoughts, all the reasons why that aversion is there and we need to move our attention away from that and down into our direct experience. What is aversion like? How does it move? How does it feel? What is it like if I act from this, speak from this? It might be for a brief moment, but it feels empowering. It feels great to be able to speak from that aversion. Then there are all of the repercussions that we don't enjoy so much. So we learn from our mistakes. We learn to see, reflect and look back and the times that we've spoken or acted out of aversion or ill will. What have been the consequences? Did it bring happiness to myself? Did it bring happiness to the other person? Did it bring happiness to both of us? Generally not. Look at that and just observe how is it to be with this feeling rather than speak from it or act from it.

We can meet these hindrances in different ways. If we're practicing meditation we can practice *śamatha*. This is a concentration practice where we still and focus the mind so those five hindrances fall away. For a while, we experience the mind in this very pleasant and open state while we're in the meditation. Then we come out of the meditation and maybe somebody does something to annoy us. We're immediately back into the hindrance of ill will. It's good to know how it feels for

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the mind to be free of these hindrances because it is so much more blissful and joyful than when they're present. We also need to learn how to meet this hindrances when we're not in those states of samadhi or concentration. The first step is to recognizing that these are hindrances. What we tend to do is identify, judge and try to suppress them. Then we get into a whole mess with suppressed anger and suppressed aversion. That is not the way to enlightenment. We need to recognize what it is and know that it's just arising for a while; it's not who and what I am. My true nature is not aversion. Even though I might feel it sometimes, it is not my true nature. My true nature is open and clear as the Buddha is always pointing to.

These hindrances come and obscure the mind for a while. If we turn towards that quality of aversion and feel it—feel the dukkha and the unpleasant feeling of that—we know that it will change. We know that if we don't act or speak on it, but instead stay fully present with it, we can use that energy. I'm not squashing the energy down. I'm not feeding, but rather I'm containing and collecting that energy in the field of awareness. Then I have a choice; I can be present with that feeling of anger and have a lot of strength from that. When the thoughts and the flood of ill will do not obscure the mind, we can act in ways that are appropriate. Sometimes it's appropriate that we feel angry about a situation. There are many things going on in the world that are wrong, that are harming many people, creatures and the planet itself. There are times when it is appropriate to feel that response of anger. However, if we just act out of anger, then we're still creating a “them” out there that are the wrong ones. This feeds the belief that if we can just fix “them,” everything will be all right. So, if we have mindfulness and awareness and interest in what's going on here, we can use the energy that comes with those hindrances by transforming it. Then, these hindrances no longer hinder us, they no longer trip us up, they no longer harm others or ourselves. They become the energy for transformation.

Ayya Anandabodhi: If our awareness is strong, all we need to do is turn and know them for what they are. We know they are not who and what we are. We know that they're changing and that, in itself, can be enough—just to collect that energy and transform it in the moment. It might be that we can't do that, that they're too strong. If that's the case, then we need to use skillful means. If we have a lot of sensual desire and the mind is constantly going out looking for

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something lovely out there, then we need to use some skillful means to cool the mind. One of the very useful things to do is to look at what the whole picture is.

When I first came to America, I discovered Hershey’s chocolate. I really like that chocolate. Plain chocolate is one of the things we can have in the afternoon. People would ask, “Is there anything you need?” We would answer, “Uhm, could you get us some of that Hershey’s chocolate?” Then, after a while, I started to see what was going on behind the scenes. I think it’s quite public what’s going on behind the scenes of Hershey’s. There’s a whole slave trade going on and Hershey’s was quite all right about saying, “Yes, we do that because it’s the only way we can keep our chocolate at a reasonable price. So, yes, we do exploit people and there is a slave trade behind that chocolate bar.” Once I found that out, I thought, “Oh, okay. Even though it’s nice and it’s one of the few things we can have in the afternoon, I don’t want it anymore. I don’t want to be part of that. The cost is too great.”

It’s about looking at the whole thing. If you have very strong sexual desire, or a craving, then look at the whole picture. If you’re already in a relationship, look at the harm that can be done to your relationship and the relationship of others by following desire. Or if it’s a desire for alcohol, you may have an addiction or you might be moving towards an addiction. The sense world is addictive because it keeps us wanting more. So we look at the whole picture. We reflect, take it all in and ask, “Okay, do I really want to follow this? What am I actually looking for?” Usually what we’re looking for is a sense of happiness, a sense of fullness and a sense of peace. We look for it in all the wrong places.

Over these four weeks we would like to point out ways that we can come back and find that peace, that fulfillment and satisfaction right here, right here in this body and mind. So I’d like to offer that for you this week.
